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RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 5925
RUEHDE/AMCONSUL DUBAI 0126
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 4167
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RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
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C O N F I D E N T I A L ASHGABAT 001521

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/IR AND SCA/CEN

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SUBJECT: IRAN/TURKMENISTAN: POLISH DIPLOMAT CALLS
BERDIMUHAMEDOV'S TEHRAN VISIT "A CATHARSIS"

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Sylvia Reed Curran. Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) In a recent conversation with Iran Watcher, Polish Charge d'Affaires Robert Rokicki said that major changes in Turkmenistan's relations with Iran took place following President Berdimuhamedov's visit to Tehran eight months ago. Rokicki, who has been posted in Ashgabat since late last year, knows several members of the president's staff personally, including one Farsi-speaking member of the protocol office who accompanied the president to Tehran in March. That staffer told him that following a "very long" meeting between Berdimuhamedov and Supreme Leader Khamenei, during which the latter "berated" Berdimuhamedov, reportedly calling him a "very bad Muslim" for disrupting gas shipments to Turkmenistan's "Muslim brothers" in Iran two years ago and his failure to adhere to the tenets of Islam, "something spiritual" occurred and Berdimuhamedov emerged a changed man. He said that the Turkmen president has come to see Iran (not Russia or any other country) as the "major player" in the region.

"MAJOR ANNOUNCEMENT" EXPECTED IN TEHRAN

¶2. (C) Rokicki credits the changes he cited as responsible for Iran's more favorable energy relations with Turkmenistan, including the recent agreement to sell Iran 20 bcm of gas a year at USD 170 per tcm. More recently, at his Embassy's national day reception two weeks ago, he said that Turkmen Deputy FM Komekov and the Iranian ambassador were chatting happily and alluded to the "new opening" in their countries' relations, and said that a "major announcement" would be made during the next round of demarcation talks between the five Caspian Sea littoral states, scheduled to take place in Tehran early next year. Rokicki conjectured that Turkmenistan and Iran may announce an agreement for the shipment of gas destined for Europe to Turkey via Iran, an arrangement that would be "the end" of the planned Nabucco gas pipeline, whereby Turkmen gas was to be shipped to Europe via Azerbaijan and Turkey. (NOTE: A U.S.-based international energy consultant who was in Ashgabat the same week for TIOGE, the Turkemistan International Oil and Gas Exposition, made a similar prediction to Iran Watcher, calling Nabucco "highly improbable," because Russia and Iran will never accept it. END NOTE.)

¶3. (C) Rokicki further believes that Turkmenistan's recent decision to completely refurbish the aging, Soviet-era Seyidi oil refinery, near the Turkmen/Uzbek border, was also a result of Berdimuhamedov's changed view of Iran and his country's relationship with it. He said that, with a threat of new sanctions looming, including on fuel, Iran has been seriously looking for other sources of refined fuel to stockpile, which might explain Turkmenistan's decision to rebuild Seyidi (i.e. in part to meet Iran's fuel needs).

¶4. (C) COMMENT: While Rokicki's interpretation of motivations in Turkmen-Iranian relations is interesting, we do not find it entirely plausible. While, no doubt, Berdimuhamedov may have disliked being berated, if that is indeed what happened, he did not undergo any type of spiritual conversion. His public behavior has not changed one iota. He continues to happily drink vodka at official events. In addition, there are indications that one reason he recently shuffled the official Muslim leadership here is that they were unwilling to go along entirely with some of his proposals. There are no visible signs of increased devoutness on the part of the Turkmen leader. Business is a more likely motivation for the Turkmen. The Turkmen are looking for alternatives to Russia, which is unlikely to buy as much gas as it did in the past, whenever a deal is finally struck. The Iranians (when they pay) make good customers for Turkmen gas. END COMMENT.
CURRAN